

This photo is available in the print version  
of *The Pornographic Culture*.

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Toulouse-Lautrec's voyeuristic world of people watching  
one another merely for entertainment.**

*Henri Marie Raymond de Toulouse-Lautrec, French (1864-1901), AT THE MOULIN ROUGE, 1892-95.  
Oil on canvas, 123 x 141 cm. Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection, 1928.610 The Art Institute  
of Chicago.*

# Isolation

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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The Moulin Rouge (which is French for “red mill,” for it was marked by a huge red windmill on its roof) was a famous nightclub just outside Paris in Montmartre. Poorer Parisian citizens moved to this district when Napoleon III reserved the city center for his friends and financiers. Being free from city taxes, Montmartre became a place to drink cheaply, and soon more decadent forms of entertainment arrived.

Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, born an aristocrat, was only 4½ feet tall. Both of his legs had been broken before the age of fifteen, and a genetic condition prevented the bones from healing and growing properly. As a young adult he was the brunt of jokes and scorn; but finding an ‘uninhibited’ life in the art, alcohol, and cabaret culture in Montmartre, he refused to hide from being in public. When the Moulin Rouge opened on October 5, 1889, the artist was one of the invited patrons and he became famous for posters and paintings depicting its theatre, dance hall, concert area, and bar.

*At the Moulin Rouge*, with its asymmetrical composition—organized by strong diagonals (the bar on the left, the floor line in the upper right), mirrors in the back area, and flat areas of color—captures the spirit, emotion, and isolation of the cabaret culture and lifestyle. The people at the table look in different directions and do not interact with one another. Likewise the two women in the background (one adjusts her hat while the other stands with her hands on her hips) do not have any exchange. The masked woman in the right foreground, probably one of the actors for a theatre performance, looks eerily out at the viewer. Sadness, melancholy, and loneliness, even in a room filled with people, are the emotions that we see in this “slice of life” from the Parisian culture. With psychological insight the artist vividly portrays his voyeuristic world of people watching other people merely for entertainment.

Toulouse-Lautrec frankly and critically depicts the society in which he lived, with its cancan dancers, prostitutes, racetracks, and circuses. How honestly is our turn-of-the-century culture portrayed in art? Are the decadent and voyeuristic elements in our culture being represented and judged truthfully for the next century’s viewers? Do we, as Christians, reflect carefully on our culture and attempt to change elements that we find are distortions of God’s plan, or do we just ignore that they exist?